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LIFESTYLE

Who Loves Ya?

■ Submitted For Your Approval: We're Forever Striving To Get That Pat On The Back For A Job Well Done

November 16, 2005

By JOANN KLIMKIEWICZ, Courant Staff Writer

It is nothing short of a drug whose dizzying highs keep us coming back for more.

We crave it, chase it. When we get a taste, our insides go warm and tingly. All is right with the world. When we go too long without it, we feel empty and unsettled, scheming for our next dose.

This heady narcotic? Approval. (Its other known street names, acceptance and validation).
And in our conformist culture, we traffic in all of its many forms: thumbs-up and pay raises, backslaps and gold stars.

We seek it out, compete for it. We dispense it and snatch it back. It is The American Way.

As children, we yearn for report cards speckled with check marks and A-pluses. As adults, we strive for glowing work evaluations. We buy cars and appliances stamped with consumer-friendly seals of approval. We open mail from credit card companies inviting us into the flock with that enticing word: pre-approved.

And, no one being exempt from its influence, we bestow it on the highest of political leaders in the form of the numerical thumbs-up or thumbs-down that is the job-approval rating.

President Bush's latest poll numbers show him hitting an all-time low: only 37 percent of Americans approve of the job he's doing, down from the 47 percent of a year ago, according to Associated Press-Ipsos polls. By contrast, in Connecticut, Gov. M. Jodi Rell is basking in a robust 80 percent approval rating.

But why do we put so much stock in this elusive, fleeting approval? Just who are we trying to please? And why would a guy like Bush, unconcerned with re-election in the

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midst of his second term, even fret about winning back the love of the electorate?

Because he's like all Americans, trained since childhood to seek out validation, to steer our courses with it and gauge our worth by how much approval we've banked.

"It's a very basic human instinct to want validation, acceptance and approval from our peers," says Karen Steinberg, assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Connecticut Health Center.

And it's a very American instinct, she says. Our work-until-we-drop culture is more obsessed with approval than other societies.

"It's just so universal. So many people struggle with it, no matter how much they've accomplished. It's almost that the more people accomplish," the more their self-esteem hinges on external signs of approval, Steinberg says.

So how did we get here?

Our society has roots in a clannish, herd-like ethos. We wandered in tribes, built towns and raised barns together.

"We are a social species. That means we need to get along in groups," says Kerul Kassel, a Florida-based personal and business coach whose corporate clients include Sony and Hilton. "And when you're in a tribe or a clan, you have to modify some of your behaviors and desires in order to fit in.

"When you need each other to survive, you don't want to be ashamed or rejected," she says.

That mentality is hardened during childhood, when parents, sometimes unwittingly, use approval and affection as a reward system.

A toddler spills milk or scribbles a crayon across the wall.

"And all of a sudden, the happy, loving face of your parents becomes disapproving. And it's overwhelming and threatening," Kassel says. "The love and affection and nurturing that was there is, at least for a time, gone. And through hundreds of thousands of these kinds of experiences as children, we learn to seek approval."

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It becomes one of the most fundamental of human needs: to feel validated, to feel we're worth something, that somehow our existence in the tiny space we occupy in this world means something to someone.

And so the parental approval we crave as children morphs into the romantic attention we yearn for in adulthood from our partners and spouses. The quest for high test scores becomes the quest for complimentary performance reviews and merit bonuses.

It's not necessarily an unhealthy pursuit.

"Approval can be a good thing," Kassel says. "All these things are useful in measuring the goals we, or someone else, have set for ourselves. ... It can really be helpful until we let it become a prison by ... making it about whether we're worthy or not. We let it be a judgment on our person rather than on certain skills or behaviors."

The value we place on approval manifests itself in every nook and cranny of our society.

Teenagers fret over whether they're wearing the right jeans, listening to the right music, driving the right cars. Parents fret over whether they're pushing the trendiest strollers, getting their tots in the coveted play groups and, well, driving the right cars.

We even seek approval before indulging in shopping trips, vacations or Friday nights on the town. We're more likely to snap up books bearing the Oprah Book Club logo, to stop in an eatery bearing a restaurant guide's star-stamped approval and catch a movie that's gotten a critic's two thumbs up.

"There's a certain value and trust consumers place in seals," says Sara Rad, director of

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brand development at the Good Housekeeping Institute, which has bestowed its coveted seal of approval on everything from beauty products to household appliances for nearly a century.

Rad says the institute's research shows that, all things being equal, shoppers are more inclined to buy a product when it carries its seal - a mark of Good Housekeeping's strict evaluation of a manufacturer's claims and of the institute's limited product warranty.

"In many cases, the seal can be a tie-breaker," she says.

Nowhere is this quest for acceptance on better display than Hollywood, where red-carpet starlets fear the fashion barbs of Joan Rivers (of all people, Joan Rivers!) and where Sally Field blurted out, while famously clutching her Oscar, "I've wanted more than anything to have your respect ... and I can't deny the fact that you like me, right now, you like me!"

Comedian Dennis Miller once riffed on the subject: "Show business lures the people who didn't get enough love, attention or approval early in life and have grown up to become bottomless, gaping vessels of terrifying abject need. Please laugh."

While perhaps most prevalent in the world of celebrity, the next place this hunt for approval is most visible is on Capitol Hill and on the political campaign trails.

It's what prompts political strategists to agonize over polls, what had former New York City Mayor Ed Koch forever asking, "How'm I doing?"

Because in a politician's world, it's not just validation at stake but a job.

The president has always claimed little concern over polls ("For every poll you quote, I'll quote another one," he said when his ratings tumbled earlier this year). Still, there's no doubt it's carried some influence, says Michael Gross, senior research manager at Ipsos Public Affairs, which gauges, among other surveys, Americans' perceptions of their elected officials and of current affairs - something pollsters have done since at least the 1940s.

While the president might not be fretting over re-election, he is concerned about making his mark in the history books and getting his public policy into place. Lukewarm reception, at best, to his proposal on Social Security, for example, led to his six-week tour of the country to tout the plan.

"If there's substantial opposition in the American public to any particular policy, that doesn't bode well for President Bush to - as he said it - spend the political capital he's banked," said Gross. "It's a good yardstick for the administration to see how the average American is receiving" its policies.

So this unending search for approval serves its positive purpose, psychologists say. Problems arise when we compromise our own standards, our own health for that promotion, for kudos on a job well done, and when we measure our own value by outside validation, when our healthy desire for approval becomes a relentless need.

We should continually check in with our own internal standards, Steinberg says.

"We need to be able to say, 'I would like to perform well; I would like to do my best, but I'm not willing to break my back for some elusive good grade and compromise other areas of my life,'" she says. "We need to keep it in perspective."

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